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To cite this article: Lawrence B. Schiamberg PhD & Daphna Gans MA (1999) An Ecological Framework for Contextual Risk Factors in Elder Abuse by Adult Children, *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, 11:1, 79-103, DOI: [10.1300/J084v11n01_05](https://doi.org/10.1300/J084v11n01_05)

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J084v11n01_05



Published online: 24 Oct 2008.



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An Ecological Framework for Contextual Risk Factors in Elder Abuse by Adult Children

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ABSTRACT. Future trends suggest both a continued growth of the elderly population, as well as the likelihood of increased demand for family caregiving which may, in turn, be associated with increasing rates of elder abuse. It is important to consider issues related to such caregiving, including potential abuse from an ecological perspective which, in turn, provides a fruitful basis for framing the problem of abuse as a set of contextually-based risk factors. This paper focuses on the contextual risk factors using an applied ecological model, a useful framework for understanding the intergenerational character of elder abuse in families, for developing recommendations for empirically-based action research, and for the development of community-based prevention and intervention strategies. [*Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com <Website: <http://www.haworthpressinc.com>>*]

KEYWORDS. Family dyad, extrafamilial environments, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, risk factors

BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

Elder abuse by adult children in the family context, particularly in situations where adult children provide care to an aging parent, is a serious

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Daphna Gans wishes to express her appreciation to Ariela Lowenstein, PhD, for her guidance and contribution to the author's professional development.

An earlier version of this article was first presented at the World Conference on Family Violence, September 8, 1998, Singapore.

problem. Consistent with the gravity of the problem, there remains a need for a comprehensive conceptual framework for better understanding elder abuse in the family as well as for developing effective, contextually-sensitive, community-based prevention and intervention strategies. The focus of this paper is on the examination of the risk factors of elder abuse by adult children, using an applied ecological framework. Such a perspective treats human development and aging as the outcome of the reciprocal relationship between the person (at whatever age) and the significant contexts of life (e.g., family, work, school, and peer relationships). An applied ecological perspective provides the theoretical frame for moving beyond a simple or categorical description of elder abuse to a contextually-based and systemic focus on intergenerational relationships as the organizing and determining factor in shaping abusive outcomes. The critical intergenerational relationship is, of course, that between the adult child as caregiver (the abuser) and the aging parent as care recipient (the victim) over time, including related risk factors. In turn, an ecological model of risk factors for elder abuse provides both a framework for developing appropriate interventions as well as a vehicle for a better understanding of the intergenerational character of the quality of life of older adults.

Changes in the demographic landscape of the population may have potential repercussions for the incidence of elder abuse in families as well as the changing character of that abuse. Projections to the year 2030 suggest that the proportion of older adults will not only continue to increase to as much as 20 percent of the total population but also the growth in numbers of the "oldest old," people over the age of 75, at greater risk for health problems and with increased needs for support, will be even more dramatic (Zarit & Reid, 1994). The proportion of this group of "oldest old" has been increasing faster than any other group in the aging population, with consequences for those who care for older adults in institutional and family settings (Steinmetz, 1990; Zarit & Reid, 1994). Furthermore, the gender differential in survival rates of older adults, with women living longer than men by seven years on average, results in a demographic context wherein the responsibility for caregiving, and the attendant risk of committing elder abuse, shifts from the spouse of the older adult to the adult children. In turn, the same "gender gap" creates a circumstance where older women, by virtue of their very survival and more frequent presence, are more likely to be the victims of elder abuse.

The multiple social consequences of these demographic changes are also evident in their impact on family relationships. Increasing life expectancies may provide opportunities for enriching intergenerational relationships in some cases and, unfortunately in others, for abusive interactions. Both scenarios provide an opportunity for understanding how intergenerational rela-

tionships frame the context of interactions between older adults and family members. Because chronic disabling diseases become more prevalent at older ages, the need for family care and other forms of assistance to the elderly has increased, as well as the accompanying caregiver stress and pressures. Although the majority of elders can live independently or with minimal assistance, substantial numbers of older adults have disabilities and therefore require care (Zarit & Reid, 1994). Families continue to be the primary source of long term care and support for older adult family members (Brody & Brody, 1989). Such family support enables most older adults to remain in their preferred familial and community setting (Zarit & Reid, 1994). This support may also be accompanied by an increased risk of, and opportunity for, elder abuse. That is, the prominence of various individuals in the caregiving hierarchy of older adults in turn shapes the character of elder abuse. To begin, most of the family caregiving is performed by spouses (Stone, Caffarella, & Sangl, 1987), and therefore the initial risk for abuse is by the caregiving spouse. However, when a spouse is deceased or unable to provide help, the adult children (typically, middle aged daughters) are next "in line of defense" (Zarit & Reid, 1994, p. 240), and next in the line of risk for elder abuse.

Research on elder abuse in family settings indicates that relatives or family members who are more frequently in contact with an older adult, in particular adult children and spouses, are the most frequent abusers. National trends in domestic violence reported by the National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA) in 1998 indicate that adult children are the most frequent abusers of the elderly. Adult children had the largest increase in reports of abuse from 1990 to 1996 (from 30.1 percent in 1990 to 36.7 percent in 1996); other family members comprised 16.1 percent of all reported abusers in 1990 and 10.8 percent in 1996; and spouses comprised 15.9 percent of all reported abusers in 1990 and 12.6 percent in 1996 (NCEA, 1998). The typical abuser is a son or a daughter caregiver, under the age of sixty, who lives with or in proximity to the older victim (Kosberg & Nahmiash, 1996). Although spousal abuse in old age as well as abuse by other relatives remains an important issue, the focus of this paper is on the somewhat less explored nature of elder abuse by adult offspring in the context of the dynamics of an intergenerational relationship. Given that there would be expected differences in the nature of relationships between spouses and those involving adult children, "it is reasonable to assume that the factors precipitating marital violence among the elderly will differ, at least in part, from those precipitating adult children's abuse of their elderly parents" (Pillemer & Sutor, 1988, p. 261).

**THE NATURE AND SCOPE OF ELDER ABUSE
IN THE FAMILY CONTEXT**

The only large scale random sample of community dwelling elderly people (Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988), revealed a prevalence rate of abuse in family settings of 32 maltreated older adults per 1,000. If that incidence rate were extrapolated to a national population, there would be between 701,000 and 1,093,560 abused elders in the nation as a whole (Wolf & Pillemer, 1989). This estimate is somewhat consistent with a sampling-adjusted nine year prevalence, based on case-finding in protective services, which found an incidence of 1.6 percent (Lachs, Williams, O'Brien, Hurst, & Horowitz, 1997). Estimates are higher in the case of abused dementia patients by family caregivers where elder neglect estimates exceed those for elder abuse (Wolf & Pillemer, 1989; Paveza et al., 1992; Steinmetz, 1988). Although no accurate data exist on the prevalence of elder abuse in the context of family caregiving, research suggests that there are potentially over one million abused elders in the United States (Glendenning, 1993). Based on formal national trends in domestic elder abuse, there has been a steady increase in reported incidences of abuse from 117,000 reports in 1986 to 293,000 in 1996 (NCEA, 1998).

When interpreting research findings, one should take into consideration the limitations that affect the generalizability of such evidence (Biggs et al., 1995; Neale et al., 1996), including the diversity of definitions of elder abuse, methodological issues, and uncertainties concerning reporting and detecting the problem. (Considerable reluctance exists on the part of both abused older adults and abusive family members to discuss the problem.) Researchers have varied considerably in their definitions of elder abuse (Hall, 1989; Hudson, 1986; Lachs & Pillemer, 1995; Steinmetz, 1990; Wolf, 1988; Wolf & Pillemer, 1989), employing a diversity of adverse acts of omission or commission against the elderly person which, in turn, require care in making comparisons between different studies (Kosberg & Nahmiash, 1996). Further complicating problems of diverse definitions are methodological issues including the variety of research paradigms (e.g., surveys of professionals, agency data, studies of attitudes and awareness, and case control studies involving interviews with older adults and their caregivers) which, in turn, vary in the use of data collection techniques and measurement instruments and frequently yield different and conflicting results (Hudson, 1986; Steinmetz, 1990; Neale et al., 1996; Johnson, 1995; Lachs, Berkman, Fulmer, & Horowitz, 1994; Anetzberger, 1987; Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988; Steinmetz & Amdsen, 1983). For example, in a large scale random sample study conducted in the Boston area, using interviews with elderly persons (Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988), physical abuse was found to be the most widespread form of abuse, in comparison to chronic/verbal aggression and neglect. However,

based on agency data from the Illinois statewide elder abuse social service program, financial exploitation was the most frequent form of abuse followed by emotional abuse and neglect, with physical abuse only fourth in frequency (Neale et al., 1996).

Another methodological issue is that only a few studies use rigorous sample surveys and case comparison techniques (Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988), while most studies are exploratory and descriptive in nature (Hudson, 1986). Moreover, most of the surveys of prevalence are cross-sectional with some exceptions such as a nine year observational cohort study conducted by Lachs et al. (1997). When subjects are asked to revisit or recall earlier or previous life episodes or experiences, these retrospective study designs introduce information bias since participants may not provide valid information (Lachs et al., 1994). Likewise, studies with small sample sizes are limited in their generalizability (Neale et al., 1996).

TOWARD AN APPLIED ECOLOGICAL MODEL FOR ELDER ABUSE

The Need for an Applied Ecological Model of Elder Abuse

Given the complexity of elder abuse and the fact that relevant risk factors for abuse are related to individuals (i.e., adult child as caregiver and older adult as care recipient), the environments or social/cultural contexts, and the interactions between person and context, an applied ecological approach could best address the requirements for a better understanding of elder abuse in context as well as the development of relevant community-based interventions. Increasingly, research on elder abuse points to the importance and utility of theoretical explanations that address not only individual characteristics of elderly victims and their abusers but also the broader contextual frame within which the abuse occurs (Kosberg & Nahmiash, 1996). The examination of the risk factors of abuse, focusing on the characteristics of abusers and victims and the social and cultural milieus in which the abuse takes place, provides a beginning perspective for the development of an applied ecological model (Kosberg & Nahmiash, 1996).

An Applied Ecological Bi-Focal Model for Elder Abuse

The applied ecological model proposed in this paper posits the essential and crucial role of the intergenerational relationship between an adult child and an aging parent *over the life course* as a basis for both the understanding of elder abuse as well as the development of relevant prevention and inter-

vention programs. The model is bi-focal, focusing simultaneously on the adult child and the aging parent as a familial dyad; it is the vehicle for describing the risk factors of elder abuse by adult children as caregivers.

The model is derived from two broader explanatory frameworks, the human ecological perspective, in particular the Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986, 1997) model, and the life course perspective. Before turning to the examination of the applied ecological bi-focal model of elder abuse, the paper briefly reviews the basic premises and concepts of the broader explanatory frameworks utilized in the model.

Human Ecological Perspective

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986, 1997) suggested a nested arrangement of four levels of environments for looking at ways in which intrafamilial processes are affected by extrafamilial environments or conditions (Bronfenbrenner, 1997). A developing person is the focus of the model. The environmental systems that can affect development include the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem. The microsystem is the family as the principal context in which human development takes place. The mesosystem is the relationships between the family and other principal settings in which human development occurs. If an aging parent is the focus of the model, the mesosystem includes relationships such as his or her formal and informal support systems. The exosystem includes environments which are external to the focal developing person, in which other family members participate. These environments might also affect the developing person. If the focal person is an aging parent, the adult child's workplace is an example of an exosystem. While the aging parent does not participate in the adult child's workplace, policies (such as family leave) may still affect his or her well being. Finally, the macrosystem is the broad ideological values, norms, and institutional patterns of a particular culture. An important component of the Bronfenbrenner model is the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, 1997), examining the influence of changes and continuities on the development of the focal individuals over time.

Life Course Perspective

While the life course perspective is embedded in Bronfenbrenner's notion of chronosystem, it has received considerable attention from other theorists and researchers as both a developmental and a historical framework for the study of intergenerational relations (Hareven, 1996). The life course perspective emphasizes the importance of time, context process, and meaning on human development and family life (Bengston & Allen, 1993). When apply-

ing the life course perspective to processes of family change, Bengtson and Allen (1993) argue that the family is perceived as a micro social group within a macro social context, as a “collection of individuals with shared history who interact within ever-changing social contexts across ever increasing time and space” (p. 470). A life course perspective in the field of gerontology helps focus attention on interaction of demographic social structure and cultural factors in shaping family patterns and generational relations in the later years of life (Hareven, 1995).

The main assumptions of the life course perspective and its key concepts are as follows. First, the “multiple time clocks” assumption suggests that there are three temporal contexts: ontogenic time, generational time, and historical time. These temporal contexts all affect human development. Ontogenic time refers to events in the biography of a person—a person’s development or life course. It is indexed by chronological age or by age periods, stages or levels. Generational time refers to the position of the individual in the rank descent within the biosocial family (e.g., grandparent, parent, grandson) and to familial events—the family development or life course. Historical time refers to the macro social dimension of time—events in the broad social context that affect families.

The second assumption is the social ecology assumption that emphasizes the importance of social context. Development and changes in families are best explained by examining both macro and micro level factors and their interactions. Finally, the diachronic assumption focuses on dynamic as well as modal aspects over time. Built on these assumptions are three major dimensions of interest to this discussion, all of which revolve around timing (Hareven, 1995, 1996). The first dimension is the individual timing of life transitions, or the timing of the individual’s entry into and exit from different family, work, and community roles. The second dimension is the synchronization of individual life transitions with collective family transitions. This dimension relates to the task of juggling of multiple family and work related roles over the life course. The performance of multiple roles might generate tensions and conflicts, especially when individual goals are at odds with the needs of the family as a collective unit. The third dimension is the accumulative impact of earlier life events on subsequent ones, according to which events experienced in life may continue to influence an individual’s or a family’s life span. The notion of “on time” events as opposed to “off time” events, which are those that occur too early or too late according to the “norms of timing” (Hareven, 1995, 1996), is part of this dimension.

An important concept to the understanding of intergenerational relations between aging parents and adult children is the norm of reciprocity, a concept from social exchange theory (Sbatelli & Shehan, 1993). This concept relates to the expectation that a relationship will be mutually gratifying. People will

stay in exchanges as long as the benefits are greater than the costs, and the level of satisfaction in the relationship is higher than the comparison level of alternatives (Bengston, Burgess, & Parrott, 1997). In this paper the norm of reciprocity will be discussed within a life course perspective, focusing on the reciprocity between the generations.

AN APPLIED ECOLOGICAL MODEL OF RISK FACTORS FOR ELDER ABUSE AND FAMILY CAREGIVING

The term “risk factors,” rather than “causes,” is the preferred terminology in the study of elder abuse, for a variety of reasons, including the existence of findings using different methodologies and sampling techniques (Ansello, 1996). In turn there is both a theoretical and practical need for a conceptual framework, such as an ecological model, for describing the risk factors of elder abuse. The ecological model proposed herein applies Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1986, 1997) nested design of four levels of environment or context of development (the micro-meso-exo-macro systems). The original Bronfenbrenner model of the ecology of human development has been adapted to incorporate a *bi-focal* perspective, focusing simultaneously on two individuals (the original model focused on a single developing person) that consist of any familial dyad such as grandparent-grandchild, or adult child-aging parent. As shown in Figure 1, the ontogenic development of both individuals is in simultaneous focus.

Since the topic of this paper is elder abuse by adult children, the co-focal dyad is the aging parent and the adult child. As shown in Figure 2, the ontogenic development of both the aging parent and the adult child are in simultaneous focus and of equal concern. In turn, the relationship between the focal individuals is then examined within the multiple contexts of the relationship-biological, physical/ecological, interpersonal, sociocultural, political, economic, and historical (Fisher et al., 1993). The interactions and interrelations between the adult child and the aging parent are further examined as they change over time (the chronosystem), with an emphasis on the multiple time clocks-ontogenic, generational and historical. An important characteristic of the applied ecological model in the bi-directional relationship (Fisher et al., 1993; Schiamberg & Gans, 1997) between empirically-based research on the nature of elder abuse and action research or the development of intergenerational programs and interventions as well as public policy.

Figure 3 provides a summary of the key risk factors at each level of the environment or context. The list of risk factors is numerous since it is essen-

FIGURE 1. The Applied Ecological Model

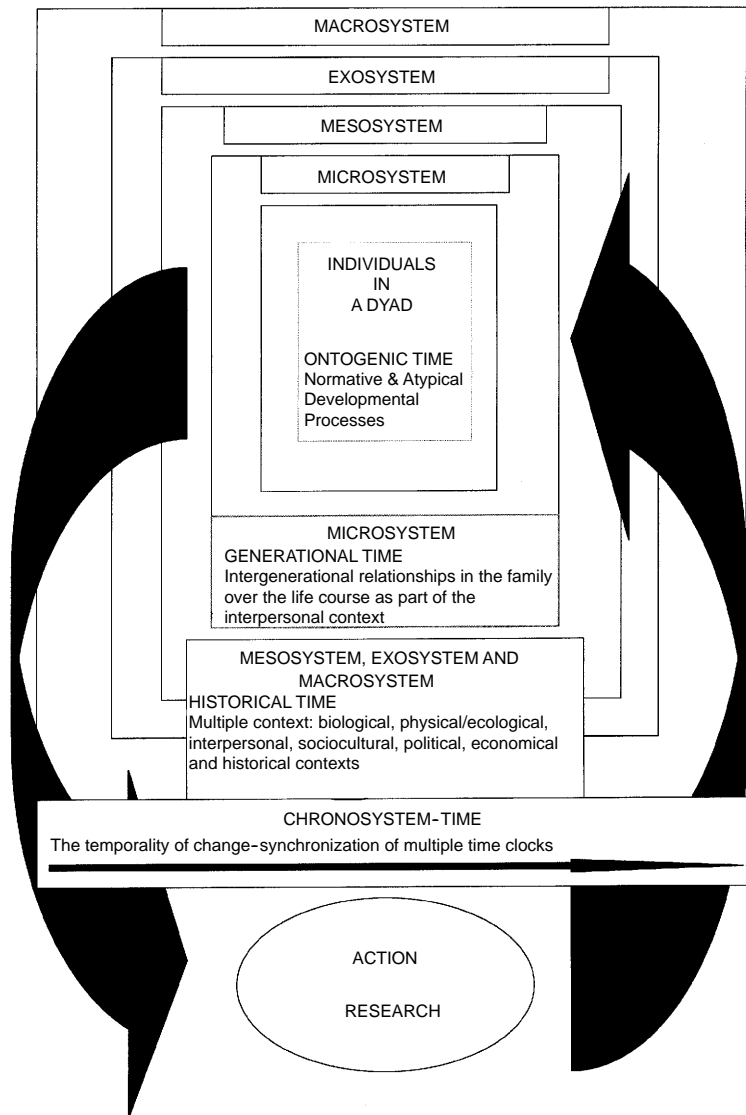


FIGURE 2. Co-Focusing on an Adult Child and an Aging Parent

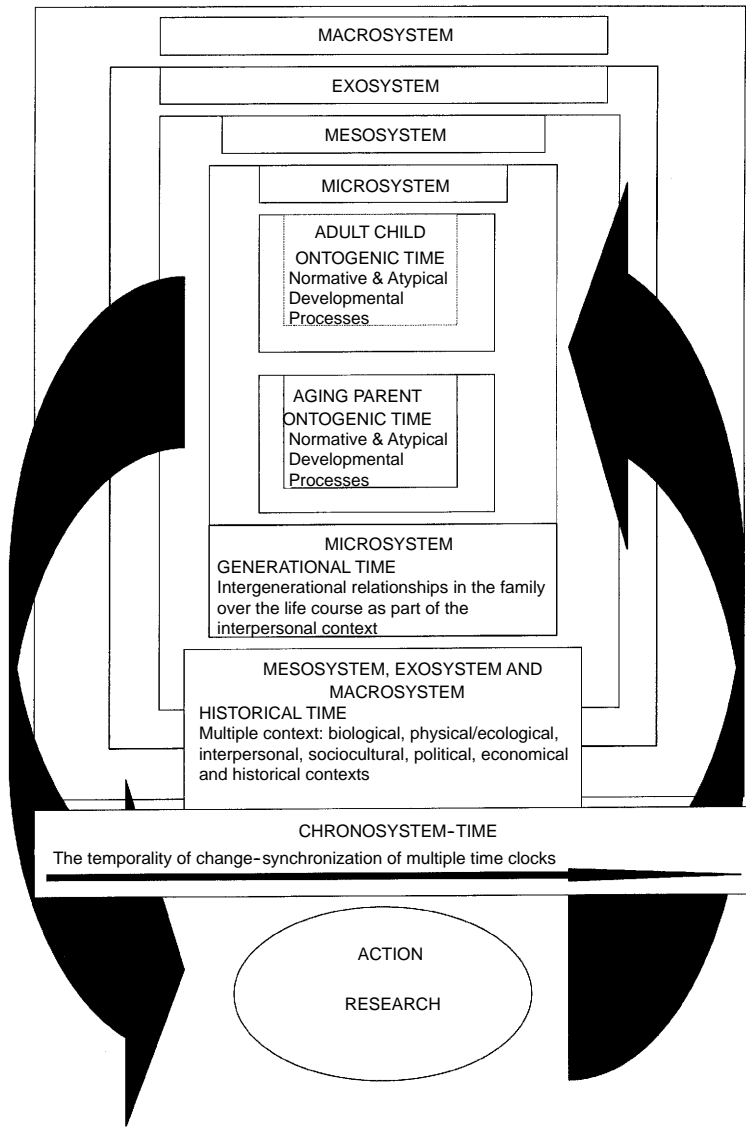
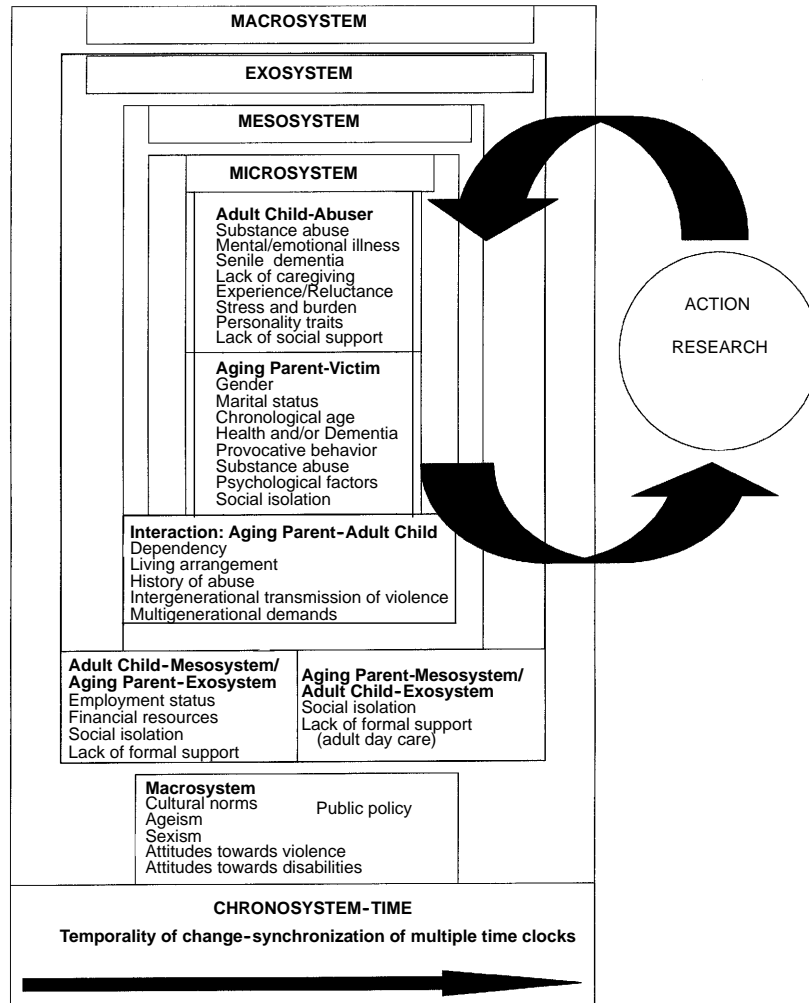


FIGURE 3. Risk Factors of Elder Abuse Within the Context of Family Caregiving
The Applied Ecological Model



tial that an ecological model provide a framework for addressing the complex character of elder abuse.

**ADULT DEVELOPMENT, AGING
AND ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS:
THE ONTOGENIC LEVEL**

The Aging Parent-Characteristics of the Elderly Victims

Gender. Some studies (Kosberg, 1988; Lau & Kosberg, 1979) revealed that women are more likely than men to be abused, suggesting that there is a larger proportion of older women than men and that they are more vulnerable to sexual molestation. However, other researchers (Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988) suggest that the risk of abuse is higher for men than for women. The contradiction in findings suggests that victims of elder abuse could be either men or women (Kosberg & Nahmiash, 1996). Aitkin and Griffin (1996) suggest that the research of intra-familial abuse should be reframed to include the issue of gender.

Marital status. A married elder is more likely to be exposed to abuse than a divorced or widowed elder. An explanation of this finding is related to the living arrangement and the fact that an older adult who lives with a spouse, or with at least one other person, is obviously at higher risk for potentially abusive interactions than someone living alone (Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988).

Chronological age. According to the data on reported cases of elder abuse, the older the person is, the higher the risk of an abusive situation (Kosberg, 1988). Advanced age is associated with health, physical, and mental impairment (Kosberg & Nahmiash, 1996). Given the demographic trends and the increasing proportion of the "oldest-old" group—those aged seventy-five and above (Steinmetz, 1990; Zarit & Reid, 1994)—it is important to consider this factor.

Health. While some studies indicate that healthy older people may be mistreated, in other studies elder abuse was found to be associated with the extent and severity of physical or mental impairment. Elderly people in poor health require a great deal of care and thus place greater demands on family caregivers (Kosberg & Nahmiash, 1996). Poor health and disability might also reduce the older person's ability to seek help and to defend him/herself (Lachs & Pillemer, 1995).

Dementia/Alzheimer's disease. Abuse prevalence of dementia patients is estimated to be higher than that in other groups (Paveza et al., 1992; Steinmetz, 1988). This might be related to the provocative behavior factor, since it is estimated that 57% to 67% of dementia patients manifest some form of aggressive behavior; that is, verbal outbursts and physical threats and/or

violence (Paveza et al., 1992). Those behaviors contribute to the risk of abuse (Kosberg & Nahmiash, 1996). Lachs et al. (1997) found that cognitive and worsening cognitive impairment were potent predictors of reported elder mistreatment.

Provocative/disruptive behavior. Overly demanding, ungrateful, and otherwise unpleasant behavior of the aging parent might contribute to the risk of abuse (Kosberg, 1988; Lachs & Pillemer, 1995).

Substance abuse. An older substance abuser is susceptible to abusive behaviors of others because he/she is less inclined to care properly for him or herself (Biggs et al., 1995; Kosberg, 1988).

Psychological factors. Depression is a risk factor of abuse (Kosberg & Nahmiash, 1996). Stoicism that leads the aging parent to accept his or her troubles without seeking relief (Kosberg, 1988) is another personality trait that puts an elder at risk. Other situations of risk exist when an aging person engages in self-blame and fails to acknowledge the fact that the abuse is the fault of the abuser (Kosberg, 1988).

Social isolation. Social isolation of the abused older person has been suggested as one of the reasons that victims of elder abuse are rarely detected (Biggs et al., 1995; Kosberg, 1988; Lachs & Pillemer, 1995; Pillemer, 1986).

The Adult Child: Characteristics of the Abusive Caregiver

Substance abuse. Not only is the substance abuser as a caregiver unable to make appropriate care decisions, but his/her economic need to support the addiction probably will take precedence over the needs of the elderly person (Kosberg & Nahmiash, 1996; Wolf & Pillemer, 1989). Alcoholism is associated with family violence, particularly that against aging people (Anetzberger, Korbin, & Austin, 1994).

Mental/emotional illness. Ongoing mental illness or emotional problems have been identified as characteristics of some elder abusers (Kosberg, 1988).

Senile dementia. Some caregivers (e.g., an elderly spouse, or in the case of this paper, older adult children) are themselves suffering from senile dementia or confusion. This will affect their ability to provide adequate care (Kosberg, 1988).

Lack of caregiving experience. It should not be assumed that a person who has never undertaken the role of caregiving for an aging person can perform the job appropriately (Kosberg, 1988). This implies the importance of the development of training programs for caregivers, providing caregiving skills as a form of intervention (Barusch, 1991).

Reluctance. Those family members who are reluctant to assume the caregiving role might fail to provide adequate care to the aging parent (Kosberg & Nahmiash, 1996).

Stress and burden. Stressed and overburdened caregivers are more likely to abuse their relatives than are caregivers who are able to handle their stress (Hudson, 1986; Steinmetz, 1990; Steinmetz & Amdsen, 1983). Zarit and Reid (1994), in their review of literature on family caregiving, emphasize the caregiver's perception of the stress (the subjective burden), which might be a more important predictor of abuse than the actual stress (objective burden). Most of the research on burden of care was conducted on primary caregivers of Alzheimer's patients. The subjective feeling of burden was found to be related to the provocative behavior of the elders, the duration of the illness, and the frequency of family members' visits (Zarit, Reever, & Bach-Peterson, 1980).

Personality traits. A few personality traits have been associated with abusive behavior (Kosberg & Nahmiash, 1996). They include hypercritical and impatient behavior, a tendency to blame the older person for caregiving problems, and unrealistic caregiving expectations (Kosberg, 1988). Other personality traits include depression (Paveza et al., 1992) and loss of self control (Pillemer, 1986). Pillemer and Finkelhor (1989) found that abusers were severely disturbed individuals with histories of antisocial behaviors or instability (Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1989).

Lack of social support. A caregiver who is not linked with informal or formal contacts such as family, friends, and co-workers is at greater risk because of lack of support (Kosberg, 1988). Kosberg and Nahmiash (1996) suggest that sometimes family members are willing to help the caregiver but are not asked to assist.

The Microsystem, the Family, and Generational Time/Events

The social exchange theory could contribute to the understanding of elder abuse in the context of *family caregiving* in a few ways, in particular as a framework for discussing the decision-making process used in arranging care for a dependent elder (Steinmetz, 1988). Decision-making, according to Steinmetz (1988), is based on assessment of the rewards and penalties of the caregiving role. Yet a comment made by an adult child, such as "it is my responsibility" (p. 15), indicates that the rewards of fulfilling the filial responsibility (often at any cost) outweigh the penalties of financial, social, emotional and physical burden.

Another way of interpreting family caregiving is as a *familial developmental task* in later life (Zarit & Reid, 1994). Thus, in terms of the life course perspective, family caregiving will be considered a *generational* event. When examining intergenerational relations in old age, exchange theory in a life course perspective is suggested. More particularly, it is proposed that the *norm of reciprocity* in the relationship—the expectation that a relationship will be mutually gratifying (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993)—should be examined *over*

time. Antonucci (1985, 1990) proposed the term “support bank” to explain intergenerational reciprocity. Antonucci suggested that parents make deposits early in the life course, when they provide care for their young children, in anticipation of future withdrawal. In other words, parents expect their children to “pay off” at a later point in the life course, when the parents are aging and need help. A similar discussion is suggested by Hareven (1996), who posited that generational supports in old age are part of a life course continuum of reciprocal relations between the generations. Early in the life course, generational assistance is extended from parents to children, while in later phases, adult children care for the aging parents. Rossi and Rossi (1996) suggest that help from adult children to aging parents will be given with more or less grace and frequency as a function in part of the quality of the relations between the children and the parents in the early years of life. Moreover, each generation carries its personal family history forward in time and “our understanding of the relationship between them is enriched by the knowledge of their shared past” (p. 458).

In the context of microsystem relationships, an essential component of elder abuse is the specific characteristics of the interaction between the aging parents and the adult children which might increase the risk of abuse.

Dependency. Some authors suggest that abuse is likely to occur when the victim is dependent on the abuser. For example, Phillips (1986) and Glendenning (1993) use social exchange theory to explain elder abuse, assuming that the abused elders “are more powerless, dependent and vulnerable than their caregivers and have fewer alternatives to continued interaction” (Phillips, 1986, p. 204). Others (e.g., Pillemer, 1986; Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988; Steinmetz, 1988; Steinmetz & Amdsen, 1983) challenge these assumptions because they did not find empirical evidence of a higher incidence of abuse in cases of a dependent elder than in cases of an independent elder. Instead, Pillemer (1986) suggests that the opposite is true. In his study, some abusers were actually more dependent on the aging relative than vice versa, especially with regard to finance and housing. Disabilities such as cognitive impairment and mental retardation or mental illness of an adult child were identified as another form of dependency on the aging parent (Griffin & Williams, 1992; Pillemer, 1985). These findings can also be explained using the exchange theory. If the abuser is dependent on the victim, abuse arises out of the abuser’s resentment over his or her powerlessness, leading him to the employment of the resources of control and violence (Pillemer, 1986; Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1989).

Living arrangements. According to Pillemer and Finkelhor (1988), the highest risk is for those elders living with a spouse and at least one child. The second group is those living with a child only, and then those living with a spouse. Elders who live alone were less at risk. Overcrowded living spaces

and lack of privacy are associated with intrafamily conflict (Kosberg, 1988; Kosberg & Nahmiash, 1996). Thus, shared living arrangements provide greater opportunity for conflict and tension that might lead to abuse (Lachs & Pillemer, 1995). Living with someone was found as a potent predictor to reported elder abuse in a nine year observational cohort study (Lachs et al., 1997).

History of abuse in the family. Elder abuse is more common in families with established lifelong patterns of violent behavior (Griffin & Williams, 1992; Kosberg & Nahmiash, 1996).

Intergenerational transmission of violent behavior. Pillemer (1986) questions the direct cycle of abuse, when a formerly abused child strikes out at his or her own abuser older parent. However, there are no data to support this statement (Biggs et al., 1995; Wolf & Pillemer, 1989). In fact, it has been suggested (Korbin, Antezberger, & Austin, 1995) that intergenerational transmission of family violence is more useful in explaining child abuse by parents than aging parent abuse by adult offspring.

Multigenerational demands. Middle aged women have been labeled “the sandwich generation” (Brody & Brody, 1989; Stone et al., 1987), because they were believed to be caught in the middle, between caregiving for children and parents. These excessive demands were found to affect their well-being and increase their stress and subjective burden, which might increase the risk of abuse. Recent research (Loomis & Booth, 1995), however, challenges these findings and indicates that multigenerational demands do not affect well being.

The Mesosystem and Exosystem

When relating to factors at these levels within a bi-focal framework, it is important to distinguish between the two focal developing persons. Bronfenbrenner (1975, 1986, 1997) suggests that the mesosystem includes the relationship between the family and other principal settings in which human development occurs, such as daycare, when a child is the focal developing person. In the case of an aging parent other factors might be included, such as formal and informal support (or lack thereof) as well as financial resources. In the case of the adult child, these factors might still be of interest when relating to his or her formal or informal support and financial resources. An important factor in the adult child’s mesosystem is the workplace. When looking at the exosystem with the bi-focal perspective, some of the factors that appear in the mesosystem of one focal person will appear in the exosystem of the other person and vice versa. The exosystem includes environments external to the developing person that still might affect his or her development, such as the parent’s work or social network in the case of a child as a focal person (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 1997). Therefore, in the current

subject, factors such as the adult child's formal or informal support will be external to the aging parent in the sense that he/she has limited access to this circle (Bronfenbrenner, 1997); however, they might still affect the aging parent and thus will be included in his/her exosystem. This is also true when factors from the aging parent's mesosystem are discussed. The adult child is not directly involved in the aging parent's formal network, yet might still be affected by the relationship between a respite service and the aging parent, and therefore, such factors will be included in the adult child's exosystem.

The Adult Child Mesosystem/The Older Adult Exosystem

Employment status and financial resources. Economic pressures and lack of financial resources to care for the dependent elder may foster resentment. This resentment might affect the quality of care as well as lead to abuse (Kosberg & Nahmiash, 1996). Moreover, it has been found (Franklin, Ames, & King, 1994) that there is an immediate impact of acquiring the eldercare role on the employment of women. Adaptation included short term work adaptations such as taking sick or personal days, arriving late or leaving early, and missing work without pay as well as taking a leave of absence and leaving the workplace. The time of acquiring the caregiver role was found to be the time in which caregivers were in need of help. Aid might include the workplace management's willingness to endorse flexible hours to caregivers, as well as co-workers' cooperation and help from other family members (Franklin et al., 1994). However, contrary to expectations, short-term work adaptations and leave of absence adaptations were less prevalent at a later point of time. In a cohort study that examined the relationship between women's paid work and their informal caregiving for aging relatives (Moen, Robinson, & Fields, 1994), it was further suggested that caregiving does not necessarily interrupt women's labor force participation, neither does employment preclude women's subsequent caregiving responsibilities. More research is needed in the intersection of work and family in the context of caregiving (Tennstedt & Gonyea, 1994).

Social isolation. The lack of social support from family members, friends, and associates has been linked with abusive behavior towards older adults in the context of caregiving (Kosberg & Nahmiash, 1996; Pillemer, 1986; Wolf & Pillemer, 1989).

Lack of formal support. As discussed earlier, caregivers may be stressed and burdened as a result of caregiving activities. Some researchers believe, therefore, that one effective way to prevent elder abuse is to prevent caregiver stress (Wolf, 1997). As a consequence, a wide range of programs aimed at providing support for families has been developed. These programs include in-home respite, support groups, and household help (Kosloski & Montgomery, 1994). The lack of support and interaction with others on the part of the

caretaker both in formal and informal settings may contribute to the risk of abuse.

The Older Parent Mesosystem/The Adult Child Exosystem

Social isolation and lack of formal support. Abused elders tend to be more socially isolated than non-abused elders (Gelles, 1997). Lack of formal contacts with representatives of community agencies or organizations might delay or even prevent the detection of an abusive situation (Wolf & Pillemer, 1989). According to Lloyd and Emery (1993), if a third party does not intervene, it is likely that the abusive situation will continue. A common example of a service aimed at dealing with some aspect of the physical or mental health of the dependent elder is an adult day care as a form of respite care (Kosloski & Montgomery, 1994). While it is the older person who participates in the service, an important goal of the program is to assist family caregivers in continuing to provide care for their aging relatives (Schwartz, 1993).

The Macrosystem and Elder Abuse

Cultural norms. Kosberg and Nahmiash (1996) discuss various cultural attitudes and values that may influence family caregivers to engage in, or may deter them from engaging in, elder abuse. For example, ageism and the view of older adults as a "less worthy" group may result in a climate that is favorable of elder abuse. Moreover, some cultures hold favorable attitudes toward violence against dependent members. Such values may increase the risk of domestic abuse within these cultures. Similarly, negative cultural attitudes toward people with disabilities may put the group of disabled older adults at high risk of abuse. Finally, sexism and the view of women as vulnerable to abuse may prevent them from seeking help (Kosberg & Nahmiash, 1996). Awareness to these and other cultural norms is helpful in understanding and identifying possible risk factors to elder abuse at the macro level.

Public policy. The 1987 amendments to the Older Americans Act created a separate provision entitled Elder Abuse Prevention Activities. This authority mandates that states develop public education and outreach to identify abuse, neglect and exploitation as well as procedures for the receipt and investigation of such reports (Neale et al., 1996). As of 1988, all states in the U.S. have some form of adult abuse and protection laws (Biggs et al., 1995). According to Biggs et al. (1995), a devolution to local initiatives might lead to uneven development of services. Another issue is the importance of the development of preventive services and long term solutions (Hudson, 1986; Lloyd &

Emery, 1993). Hudson (1986) suggests that these programs are more effective than laws that decrease family privacy and control, such as mandatory reporting laws. A criminalization of abuse and the lack of long term solutions might lead to reluctance by professionals to report elder abuse (Biggs et al., 1995). Thus, the abusive situations will continue to exist, even when detected.

In summary, the above sections have identified the risk factors of elder abuse and categorized them into four different levels: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The enumeration of risk factors is not exhaustive; rather, it represents the major factors discussed in the literature. The categories are not mutually exclusive, with overlaps as mentioned by Kosberg and Nahmiash (1996). In turn, elder abuse results from the dynamic interaction between personal, family, social, and cultural factors (Kosberg, 1988). These interactions are played out in an intergenerational framework, with substantial implications for quality of life in an aging society.

AN APPLIED ECOLOGICAL MODEL AS A FRAMEWORK FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Through awareness of the risk factors, health caregivers, other professional caregivers, and family scholars can become more cognizant of the dynamics of elder abuse and can begin to consider methods of prevention and intervention (Kosberg & Nahmiash, 1996). The multi-level approach of identifying risk factors in response to abuse presented in this paper is consistent with prior team efforts in the field of family violence in general and elder abuse in particular. Edelson and Tolman (1992) presented an integrated ecological framework for understanding and explaining the problem of woman abuse and identifying interventions to stop it. Their integrated approach rests on the foundation of an ecological framework with an integration of several other perspectives such as historical, feminist, and social learning analyses. Edelson and Tolman (1992) suggest that their integrated model not only has a strong explanatory power, but also offers practical guidance to intervention with men who batter.

Future aging trends indicate that family caregiving for elderly members will become an increasingly demanding responsibility for adult children and other family members, with the potential for increasing elder abuse as well (Cicirelli, 1990). The problem of elder abuse within the context of family caregiving is not a consequence of a single event and cannot be explained by a single cause. Rather, elder abuse results from a dynamic interaction between personal, familial, social, and cultural factors. Risk factors appear to exist in all levels of the ecological context of human development, including, as suggested by Lerner (1997), interpersonal/psychological, interpersonal/fa-

mial, social network, community, institutional/societal, and cultural as well as physical ecological and historical.

Not only does an ecological perspective enable professionals to deal with the complexity of the problem, it also provides a framework for understanding the interrelation and interdependence between the different risk factors. The organization of the risk factors within the nested arrangement of environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 1997) emphasizes the influence these factors have on each other, and therefore, enables family researchers to better understand the dynamics of elder abuse within the context of family caregiving. Moreover, given the interrelation and interdependence between the different risk factors, it seems that no one intervention program is likely to adequately address the problem of elder abuse within the context of family caregiving. Rather, successful intervention should consist of *multiple interventions*. Furthermore, because risk factors exist in all levels of the ecological context of human development, the multiple interventions should be *directed at all these levels of the environment* and not only at the aging parents (the victims) or the adult children (the abusers) alone.

Promising problem solving strategies are emerging from an applied ecological perspective (typically in response to a range of community/family issues and problems such as poverty or teen violence) that involve a significant level of community empowerment and collaboration. Such community-based efforts, which have been directed at a wide range of individual, family, and community problems, include (but are not limited to) the following: (1) the emergence of university/community partnerships; (2) the development of grass roots community coalitions, reflecting the ecological diversity and complexity of the problems at hand; and (3) the emergence of development-in-context programs and evaluation strategies (Fisher & Lerner, 1994; Lerner & Simon, 1998; Schiamberg, 1988, 1997) which, in turn, reflect an increasing awareness in the social science community of the need for applied, ecologically-valid, research in the service of families, children, and adults in actual community settings.

In conclusion, perhaps one of the primary contributions of an ecological perspective to elder abuse by adult children is to help clarify and define the very nature of the problem. How problems are posed or defined guides the direction of practical efforts. In turn it has been suggested that the social sciences have failed to successfully address such problems as elder abuse, not because solutions to problems were not developed, but rather because our frameworks or models lead us to focus on and develop strategies for the wrong problem.

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